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ABSTRACT

Directors of 39 projects funded by the federal Consumers' Education Program were interviewed about their attitudes toward federally mandated evaluation. The projects were varied, and included activities such as consumer workshops; development of curriculum, materials or policy; inservice training; consumer advocacy/counseling; and television programming. Funding averaged $57,410. Most directors felt that federal officials were more concerned with audit data (expenditures, number of people served, attainment of objectives), than with program improvement. Only six directors felt that assessment of objectives was the primary purpose of evaluation; most emphasized program improvement and formative evaluation as the perceived purpose. Furthermore, the type of evaluation directors actually implemented reflected that purpose. Directors had a common problem--an inability to determine whether participants, be they teachers or citizens, used project information. Administrators also shared a need for reports of similar projects and for sample questionnaires written for people with limited research experience. (CP)

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An Assessment of the Ways Local Grant Programs Perceive, Implement, and Utilize Program Evaluation:

Local Project Evaluation Through the Looking Glass or Project Directors in Wonderland

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An Assessment of the Ways Local Grant Programs Perceive, Implement and Utilize Program Evaluation

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This study examines how administrators of local education grant programs implement mandated evaluations. Interviews with administrators indicated that although they believe evaluation's prime purpose is to measure whether programs attain their objectives, they primarily wanted formative evaluation information. Because they could not obtain practically-oriented evaluation materials, they felt they spent too much time developing their evaluations. They want such materials and hope that federal officials will compile and disseminate evaluations from local programs so administrators can learn from other programs. Administrators' responses indicate areas where the evaluation community can provide assistance to improve local level evaluations.

Congress and the public have become increasingly concerned about the effectiveness of social, labor, and educational programs, especially in light of the ever increasing inflation rate, and the congressional and citizen initiatives to balance the budget and decrease taxes. Evaluation is seen as a tool which provides information about the effectiveness and impact of these programs. It is assumed that such information will provides some rational basis for deciding which of these programs should receive continued funding because they contribute to the national welfare.

Two approaches to evaluation have been adopted by Congress to help meet that end. The first involves evaluations conducted on a national scope of programs such as Head Start, the Follow-Through Program, and the Title I education program. The second approach involves the evaluation of local grant projects. Enormous attention has been given to the former type of evaluation in discussions dealing with the effectiveness of national programs and the methodological problems of conducting large scale studies. The second approach has received less attention but is of no less importance.

Implementing federally mandated evaluations at the local level can be problematic for grant recipients because project directors generally do not understand what evaluation is or how one conducts a good evaluation. The directors of local projects generally receive their primary training in areas such as counseling, social work, and teaching which contribute little background about evaluation save for exposure to elementary statistics courses. Evaluation can typically be threatening to such directors who know little about it. They often equate it to an expose of

project deficiencies and mismanagement, especially financial, resulting in the termination of funding. The evaluation community has largely overlooked local grant projects and the difficulties their directors face working with evaluation even though there are hundreds of such projects.

The following study was conducted to gather baseline from local project directors on how they conceptualize and implement evaluation. The study draws upon the experiences of directors who worked with 39 of the 57 projects funded through the Consumers' Education Program (CEP) of the U.S. Office of Education (USOE) in Fiscal Year 1978. The Office of Consumers' Education was chosen as it funds a diverse range of grantee agencies from colleges/universities to community action agencies (Table 1 indicates the types and numbers of grantee agencies studied). Such diversity was sought to better capture the range of local grant projects which must implement mandated evaluations. The funded projects included such activities as workshops, curriculum development, media presentations, and inservice training as shown in Table 2. Funding levels for the studied projects averaged $57,140. Between December, 1978 and June, 1979, semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with directors exploring their experiences working with evaluation.

Interviews with directors revealed that they are in a dissonant position. They perceive the federal government as wanting one type of information from evaluations while directors themselves see other purposes to evaluation. The dissonance is compounded as directors implement evaluations which are not totally consistent with what they see as the purpose of evaluation. At the same time, project directors feel they lack pertinent information on how to implement adequate evaluations. To understand the project director's quandry, it is

important to understand how they view the federal system, how they conceptualize evaluation, and how they implement evaluation with their projects.

A large number of project directors (N=21) saw federal evaluation mandates as seeking data related to how projects spend their funds, the number of people they serve, and whether projects meet their objectives. These are areas which relate to accountability and can be seen as tantamount to a program audit. A smaller group of directors (N=12) believed these evaluations would help the CEP with its planning and project funding cycles as well as help it secure its annual appropriation from Congress. A third group of directors (N=4) said the project evaluations helped develop more effective materials for educating consumers. Two project directors were cynical enough to say that projects were required to evaluate themselves because of a requirement placed on the CEP by a higher level of the federal/congressional bureaucracy. There were some project directors who believed that the evaluations they completed affected whether their projects would receive an additional year of funding. In reality, however, such funding decisions were made before project evaluations were completed and sent to the Office of Consumers' Education. Except for this exception, the perceptions of project directors are quite accurate. One undersecretary at the Department of Health, Education and Welfare commented that, in point of fact, at that level of the bureaucracy and above, officials were largely concerned with whether appropriated funds reach projects, how funds are spent, and the number of people projects serve. It is small wonder that directors are confused about evaluation as it appears that federal officials are interested in obtaining program audit information from evaluations as opposed to using evaluations to improve projects.

Interviews showed a large inconsistency exists between what directors see as the purpose of evaluation, what project directors sought to learn from their evaluations, and the types of evaluations that were actually implemented. These inconsistencies are due to a failure to have a clear conceptualization of evaluation. There were three different ways that project directors perceived the purpose of evaluation: those who stated evaluation's purpose is to assess whether a project achieves its objectives (N=6); those who felt it provides information for improving a project's effectiveness (N=11); and those who believed evaluation serves both these purposes (N=20). Yet, when asked what they wanted to learn from their projects' evaluations, only 10 of 26 directors referred to measuring whether their projects met their goals. Thirty of the directors, in contrast, wanted to learn information they could use to improve project effectiveness.

The types of evaluations implemented with local projects reflected the project directors' high desires for information that formative evaluation can provide. This was reflected in 28 evaluations. Even when project directors felt evaluation's purpose included gathering information relating to goals and objectives, their evaluations tended to emphasize formative information. Only 13 directors mentioned examining project goals and objectives in their evaluations. Table 3 presents the kinds of evaluation strategies used with these consumers' education projects. It is curious to note that project directors emphasized formative evaluation while neglecting evaluations which examined whether project objectives were achieved. An insight into this phenomena may relate to the objectives themselves. When the objective reads

something like, "The XYZ Project will conduct 6 workshops for 150 people," a typical objective, the director may feel that assessing whether the project has met its objective is self-evident. The more important question is how effective were the workshops and how could presentations be improved as opposed to whether indeed the stated number or workshops were held.

The history of evaluation has led people to believe that its major purpose is to measure whether projects meet their objectives. Secondly, the perceptions project directors have of the federal system reinforce this attitude. Yet, project directors primarily want and implement evaluations that provide formative information. In spite of their conflicting perceptions, project directors believed evaluation was a useful project activity because they recognized that it can help them improve their projects. Several directors who had no previous experience with evaluation stated they would use evaluation again, even if it were not a required project activity.

Eighteen of the 39 project directors indicated that they had little trouble working with their evaluations. Looking at their backgrounds and the resources available to them the reasons for this are evident. They either had previous experience working with evaluation or could draw upon the evaluation skills of other staff members of the sponsoring agency.

It is important to understand the realities projects operate within when considering the problems directors need working with evaluation. Local grant projects typically face problems related to the availability of staff, time, and funds. These consumers' education projects were funded with one-year grants averaging about $57 thousand. Within that

framework, projects had to develop, implement, and evaluate their programs. Their small staffs, sometimes consisting of only the director, had the responsibility of carrying out all the tasks required to complete these activities. Often directors mentioned that they had to make difficult decisions about how to maximally use project resources. In some cases, these decisions caused them to focus on the project's implementation phases in preference to evaluation. Given their statements of evaluation's purposes, one can understand these directors' programmatic concerns. Directors, faced with the administrative requirements of even a small project, limited expertise in evaluation, and budgets which precluded hiring a full-time or part-time evaluator must try to fulfill what they perceive as the evaluation requirements while still trying to learn information they want from a project evaluation.

Despite the diversity of these projects' activities, the problems that directors mentioned having with evaluation fell into two broad areas. The first area deals with whether project participants, be they teachers or citizens, in fact utilized information disseminated by the projects. Project directors were unable to assess whether teachers used information on consumers' education in their classrooms. Similarly, directors could not ascertain whether citizens applied information when faced with a consumer problem especially since an appropriate situation might not occur for an indeterminable time. The only information that projects could readily pertained to the quality of materials, not whether they had the long-term impacts intended. The second area directors faced involved logistical problems which impede data collection. Several project directors said, for instance, that open-ended questions and pre/posttests

did not work well with low-income people in these evaluations. Other directors working with television programs remarked that they had no adequate way to judge whether people watched their programs, let alone whether viewers found the information useful. In both these types of situations, directors were unable to gather evaluation information they felt would be particularly meaningful.

Directors, in addition to being aware of the problems they had working with evaluation, had clear notions of the kinds of resource materials they would like to help them implement more meaningful evaluations. Many, for instance, believed evaluation materials written for people with limited research experience would be extremely useful. Staff persons who often possess substantive knowledge of the project's content area could use such materials to design evaluations. Directors would like such materials to include sample questionnaires and other data collection instruments that they could either adapt or use as models when developing their own measures. In addition, they wish evaluations of similar projects were more widely disseminated so projects could benefit from seeing how others deal with similar problems. Directors believe that referring to such information would help reduce the amount of time they have to spend developing their own evaluations.

The evaluation community can be of valuable assistance by developing resource materials which help project directors with evaluation. The evaluation literature is replete with theoretical discussions about evaluation and strategies one could use when conducting assessments of national programs. Project directors, though, have difficulties using these materials for two reasons. First they are typically written

at a theoretical level for people with a background in research design. In addition, project directors lack the time to read the evaluation literature for the information they need. The net result leaves the director who does not have such a background with no better idea of how to proceed with an evaluation that meets his/her information needs. Second, much of this information assumes that strategies such as randomly assigning participants to treatment conditions is feasible and desirable with these projects. This assumption is unrealistic in many cases given the scope of these projects. While this was by no means an exhaustive study, the information from it indicates there is a strong interest in evaluation resources which offer almost a practitioner's guide to evaluation aimed at local grant project personned. Besides offering the kind of practical information on evaluation just discussed, these resources could also provide an overview of evaluation and its many facets aimed at tying together the conceptual and implementation levels of evaluation. This might lessen the quandry caused because directors think evaluation's purpose relates to goals and objectives but they implement evaluations designed to improve project effectiveness. Evaluation materials for project directors would help them perform more effectively a task that directors indicate they want to do.

With the importance of evaluation likely to increase over the coming years, project directors will only continue to face the kinds of problems discussed in this paper. Evaluators could valuably spend time developing resource materials for local projects. If evaluators do not respond to project needs, other groups that sell short-cuts and "expertise" in the federal grants and contracts hustle may expand

into the evaluation arena. Their contributions to local project evaluations may be dubious. Secondly, the evaluation community is in the best position to offer guidance and technical assistance to the federal government on how to utilize local project evaluations. In conclusion, the time is opportune for the evaluation community to pay attention to local project evaluations.

Table 1

Types of grantee agencies studied

Type of agency	Number in sample
University/Community College	13
Local Education Agency	4
Other Education Related Organization	4
Consumer Advocacy Group	8
Community Action Agency	7
State or Local Government	3
	39

Table 2

Summary of Project Activities

Type of activity	Number of Projects*
Presentations for Consumers	15
Curriculum/Course Development	8
Training	8
Materials Development	7
Consumer Counseling/Advocacy	5
Policy Development	3
Television Programming	3

*Total is greater than 39 since some projects included more than one type of activity.

Table 3

Summary of Project Evaluation Activities

Evaluation Strategy	Number of Projects Using Strategy
Participant Follow-up Strategies - Strategies that gather information from project participants.	
1. Cognitive Information - Information relating to what participants learned from projects and the quality of project materials/presentations.	
Evaluation Questionnaires	26
Pretests-posttests	9
Follow-up with project participants	5
Interviews	3
2. Behavioral Information - Information gathered by observing project impacts on behaviors.	
Follow-up with project participants	5
Site-visits	2
Project Monitoring - Strategies that gather information about project management and effectiveness.	
1. Project Audit - Information relating to project management.	
Examination of whether objectives are met	4
Record keeping	4
Time lines	2
2. Project Impact - Information relating to project effectiveness.	
Informal comments from participants	10
Informal comments from Advisory Committees	8
Phone calls for information received	3